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Identifying preschool teachers' opinion about peer bullying

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify preschool teachers' opinion about bullying. How do teachers perceive bullying? What kind of strategies they apply to prevent bullying or what they do when they face peer bullying in their classrooms. In order to determine teachers' opinion about bullying, data collected through observations and semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, teachers have been asked questions to find out their level of knowledge about bullying and questions about whether they have already encountered bullying behaviors and their solution strategies. In this respect, the researchers interviewed fifteen preschool teachers working at public and private schools. The interviews have been analyzed and interpreted through descriptive analysis technique.

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Keywords: Bullying; preschool; teacher.

1. Introduction

School bullying is widely regarded as a serious personal, social and educational problem which affects a substantial portion of school children. Researchers have identified a number of significant correlates of bullying within the peer group and the school environment. Children who bully others are more likely to be nominated as responsible for 'starting fights' and 'disrupting' others (Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992).

Bullying is a specific form of aggressive behavior and can be described as a situation when a student: 'is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students' (Olweus, 1993).

There is a general agreement that for a behavior to be considered bullying, it must have three elements: It must be intended to harm, it must be repetitive, and a difference of power--physical, social, or other--must exist between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1993).

Bullying is a subset of aggression that is typically categorized as physical, verbal, or relational (Shore, 2005). The bullying behavior can be 'physical' (e.g. hitting, pushing, kicking), 'verbal' (e.g. calling names, provoking, teasing, making verbal threats, spreading slander), or can include other behavior such as making faces or social exclusion. (Fekkes, Pijpers and Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005) Physical bullying tends to receive more attention from school

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personnel. Many schools have developed zero tolerance policies for violent behavior, prioritizing physical bullying over other forms of bullying (Limber & Small, 2003). Relational bullying is a form of social isolation that includes behaviors such as gossiping, intentionally leaving students out of activities, spreading rumors, and other measures that seek to change peer groups (Olweus, 1993). Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) described relational bullying as an "attempt to inflict pain in such a manner that he or she makes it seem as though there has been no intention to hurt at all"

Regular bullying is hereby usually defined as recurrent behavior with a frequency of either 'several times a month', 'sometimes' or on a 'weekly' basis. (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995, 1996).

Most researchers have focused on children from ages 8 to 12, or older. (Warden and Mackinnon, 2003). The existence of victimization in preschool children, however, had been systematically studied and demonstrated in earlier studies: Although a few investigators have studied young victims of peer aggression 3- to 4-year olds (Patterson, Littman, & Bricker, 1967) 4- to 5-year-olds (Troy & Sroufe, 1987) 5- to 7- year olds in day care centers in Norway; in the United states with kindergarten children, and in Switzerland (Alsaker, 1993; Alsaker and Vulkanover, 2001; Alsaker & Nägele, 2008; Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996)

Furthermore, of those investigators who have studied young children, none have examined the link between peer victimization and subsequent school adjustment. Clearly, more research is needed on the relation between early victimization and children's school adjustment, especially at the onset of elementary school.(Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996)

All studies showed that the extent to which victimization occurs in the early childhood years is comparable with that in grade school and that it has an immensely stressful effect on young children. (Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996)

In order to introduce solution proposals for preschool bullying, it is of primary importance to find where and how bullying takes place and to identify teachers' level of knowledge about bullying. The main purpose of this study is to find out preschool teachers' opinions about bullying.

2. Method

This is a qualitative study as required by the research process composed of semi-structured interviews conducted to identify preschool teachers' level of knowledge on bullying behaviors, in-class observations of the behaviors of the children defined as a bully and verification of observation data with teacher interview data.

2.1. Research Model

This is a qualitative study carried out to investigate preschool teachers' opinions about peer bullying.

2.2. Scope and Participants

The study was carried out with 15 preschool teachers working in nursery classes of primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education or in independent nursery schools, in Kırşehir, Turkey. The participating teachers graduated from departments of either preschool teaching (n=11) or child development (n=3) or nursery school teaching (n=1). The distribution of their teaching experience is as follows: four to ten years (n=10), ten to sixteen years (n=3), over sixteen years (n=2). All these teachers work with children in the age group of six.

2.3. Data Collection

The data of this study was collected through a semi-structured interview form. In addition, non-participant observation technique was used to observe children in the classroom of four teachers who had mentioned that there were bullying behaviors in their classroom. Every child was observed for three days – 30 minutes during free activities and 30 minutes during art activities each day, hence a total of 180 minutes. The observation was divided into three-minute periods. During the observation, the bullying behaviors of children were recorded as short and descriptive notes.

2.4. Data Analysis

The interviews with teachers were tape recorded. Then all voice recordings were transcribed and analyzed by descriptive analysis technique.

3. Findings

This part covers the findings obtained from teacher interviews about bullying behaviors and findings obtained from observations.

3.1. Teachers' Opinions and Perceptions about Bullying

The findings obtained from interviews are provided according to their rank in the form. The questions are categorized into two as dimensions of knowledge and practice.

Questions in the dimension of knowledge:

The researcher asked the teachers to define bullying in their own words in order to find their perceptions about bullying. The teachers mostly defined bullying as “using force” (n=8). Secondly, they defined bullying as “violence, battering, brute force, provocation, verbal assault, causing bodily harm, insulting” (n=5). One of the teachers defined it as “disobedience and fidgetiness” whereas another one defined it just as “a bad thing”. The replies may show that there are differences in teachers' perceptions about bullying. Some teachers label a behavior as bullying just when it involves physical violence.

When asked the types of bullying, seven teachers categorized it as physical, verbal and psychological bullying. The others (n=8) did not make a correct classification.

Five teachers defined correctly as “bully, victim and onlooker” the people who are involved in bullying. The other teachers were not able to make a correct definition.

The teachers were asked in which gender group bullying was encountered more. Seven teachers said in both of them whereas eight teachers mentioned it was more common among male children.

Questions in the dimension of practice:

The teachers were asked whether they already encountered bullying behaviors and to define bullying behaviors and their frequency according to their experience.

The replies demonstrate that three teachers did not encounter such a behavior, that eight teachers met bullying behaviors previously and that four teachers had students showing bullying behaviors at the moment. Asked to define bullying behaviors, teachers mentioned perpetrating violence such as beating or pushing, harming their environment, throwing toys (Teachers 1, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14); knowing no bounds (Teacher 3); using force when they want something (Teacher 4); acting aggressively (Teacher 11); swearing (Teacher 13); forcing their friends to play a certain game (Teacher 14); and elder children cornering preschool children in corridors or toilets and mocking at them (Teachers 14, 15). One of the teachers avoided providing a clear definition (Teacher 10).

The eight teachers, who mentioned that they encountered bullying behaviors in their classroom, were asked how they organized the setting to avoid such behaviors. Two teachers said they made in-class physical arrangements such as making bullies sit close to the teacher and away from their victims (Teacher 9, 11) whereas two teachers told they made arrangements about the time when children go to the garden and toilet and arrangements related with accompanying the children (Teacher 14, 15).

When they were asked how they intervened in case of a bullying behavior in their classroom, two teachers mentioned they did not intervene and ten teachers said they did. The interventions defined were speaking to families (Teachers 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14), punishing (Teachers 3, 9, 13), speaking to the child (Teachers 8, 11, 14, 15) and helping the child to find a solution him/herself (Teacher 8).

Teachers were asked if they received help from another expert or institution in case of a bullying behavior. Five teachers mentioned that they received help from psychological counselor of the school.

None of the teachers received training on bullying, and most of them (n=14) said they wanted to receive such a training.

3.2. *Bullying Behaviors Observed Among Children*

Four teachers out of fifteen teachers who participated in the study mentioned that they already had children with bullying behaviors in their classroom. The researcher observed four students separately for 180 minutes in the classroom, and found that three of these children do not have bullying behaviors but show violent behaviors to their friends who interrupt the game during free playing activities. The fourth child who was said to show bullying behaviors by the teacher (Teacher 3) had bullying behaviors in 37 periods (64.4%) out of 3-minute 60 periods. According to the data obtained through observations, the bullying behaviors of the child are parallel with observations of the teacher. The behaviors observed are as follows:

- Quarreling with children who are physically weaker, forcing them to do whatever s/he wants and threatening them with doing physical harm (e.g. “I’ll tumble you down the bike in the garden if we don’t play the game I want”, “I’ll beat you if you don’t do what I say”, “I’ll pinch you when there’s no one around if you don’t play with me”).
- Frequently saying “I don’t like girls, they are very spoilt”, and continuously wetting, pinching or cornering girls in the toilet.
- “I set up this game, you can’t play”. Not letting some children join the play.
- Giving a nickname to friends, and threatening the ones who do not use those nicknames. (“Your hair is like macaroni, Macaroni-Headed Ayşee” “If you don’t call her Macaroni-Headed, I’ll call you Onion-Headed.”)
- Taking and using his/her friends’ belongings without permission, and threatening to break up that thing when the owner asks him/her to return it. (“This car is mine from now on. Ali, you can’t take it back. Ali, I’ll break it down and jump on it. I’ll throw it out of the window, then other children will take it.”)

5. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

The study demonstrates that teachers define bullying behaviors mostly as physical violence and disobedience, and rarely consider verbal and psychological aspects of bullying. The observations of the researcher revealed that the behaviors defined as bullying behaviors by teachers are mostly not bullying.

It is understood that, as children mostly spend time in the classroom, they are subject to bullying behaviors in their classrooms in preschool education institutions; and that children are faced with bullying behaviors of elder children in corridors and toilets only in nursery classes within primary schools.

Pişkin (2002) found out that children are mostly exposed to bullying in the classroom, then in school corridors and thirdly in play grounds and gardens. Fekkes, Pijpers and Verloove-Vanhorick (2005) revealed that children are faced with bullying from classmates and children of the same age group at a rate of 60% and from children at higher classes at a rate of 10%. These findings comply with those of our study.

Although children tend to keep it as a secret when they are subject to a bullying behavior, they may share their bullying experience with people they feel close and trust in. They prefer to tell what they experienced first to their teachers and secondly to their family. That is why some measures have been taken at schools with the people concerned to prevent bullying. (Perren, 2000). School staff, primarily administrators, teachers, psychological counselors and other personnel have the responsibility to create an environment where victims of bullying are supported and protected and where these children feel free and secure (Pişkin, 2002).

Important responsibilities fall upon schools and teachers to prevent bullying. Providing peace in a healthy school environment is one of the most important topics on which students, teachers, administrators, parents, society and individuals exerts efforts. The way of handling and solving problems in the school environment has a significant impact upon integrity of the school (Bodine, Schrupf and Crawford 2007).

It is of particular importance that teachers know what bullying behaviors are and what they can do when they encounter such behaviors. Based on the abovementioned research findings, the following suggestions can be made for practical implications and further research:

- This study can be replicated with a larger sample in various schools.
- Further research can involve opinions and behaviors of the whole school personnel concerning bullying.
- In-service trainings about bullying can be offered to teachers.

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